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ABSTRACT

Commentary on the need to establish priorities in instructional objectives in the teaching of poetry includes a discussion of the implications of teaching for appreciation and for knowledge. Observations on teaching techniques lead to a review of various types of questions judged helpful in developing appreciation. The potential use of technological media is explored with special emphasis placed on the use of cassettes for student recitation. (RL)

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SOME TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING FRENCH POETRY

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Many students tend to adopt toward poetry the attitude of the general public toward contemporary art: "I don't know a thing about poetry, but I know what I like." Frequently the range of what they like is lamentably small.

Obviously one of the aims of a poetry course should be to extend this range. When I say "poetry course" in this context I mean not only a course devoted exclusively to the study of poetry, but also any course in which poetry is taught -- a survey, a century, or a period course. Although I have applied the techniques that I am about to describe only at the university level, I am convinced that most of them could be utilized also in secondary schools. Elementary school and kindergarten teachers have known for decades that their pupils will like any poem that has jingly rhymes and a strong rhythm. This sort of auditory appreciation, however, does not necessarily distinguish between poetry and verse; a more cerebral enjoyment can be expected of older students, and this, I think, is what we mostly try to teach. Or is it?

We are agreed, I am sure, that a teacher should explain his aims, he must be able to identify them and rank them in order of priority. Instill a body of facts about selected important poems? Including the variants of succeeding editions? Acquaint the students with the lives and personalities of the great poets? Teach the development of poetry through the centuries from the Chansons de geste to Yves Bonnefoy? Probably all these aims have some validity. Establishing priorities for any one class is more difficult. In general I think my greatest effort goes into teaching enjoyment of poetry. But, as with anything else, the more students know about a poem, the more they enjoy reading it. This is my reason for teaching versification, aesthetic theories, and a little about the lives of poets. I try to cultivate a critical appreciation, and I have discovered a dramatic way to show a new class what the course is all about. I distribute copies of last semester's final exam. Here, for example, is the question asked of the students in my fall of 1969 graduate seminar: "Voici un poème que vous lirez tous pour la première fois, j'espère. (a) Relevez des indications de l'influence de quelques poètes dont nous avons étudié l'oeuvre. (b) Fixez la date approximative de ce poème en donnant les raisons de votre décision. (c) Faites une analyse détaillée du poème." Naturally, I had not revealed the name of the author. After the class has thought about this for a little while, and had a chance to read the poem, I distribute copies of the best answer that I have received. This is read aloud by class members. Then I tell the students that the aim of the course is to prepare them to understand and appreciate many different kinds of French poetry, to have some know-

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ledge of its historical development, so that at the end of the semester they may be able to demonstrate their appreciation and knowledge as well as the student whose paper we have just read.

Appreciation and knowledge. Just what is involved here? Appreciation, to my mind, means evaluation. Fortunately, Mr. Webster agrees with me: "Appreciation", he says, is "clear perception, especially of aesthetic quality." It does not mean liking every poem that has been judged great by a generation of critics. It means being able to see why it was judged great. In order to see this, one must have a certain amount of knowledge of the aesthetic ideals of the various generations. I can see no reason to require students to memorize a list of the volumes written by a certain poet with their dates of publication, but I do think they should know, before passing a personal judgment, that a poem was written in, for example, the Parnassian period. They they may say if they like: "This poem is admired for its perfection of form, for its impersonality, for its impassibility, but we prefer Musset" or "We like a poem to be mysterious." I believe that students should be encouraged to develop personal tastes, and that these tastes should be as catholic, as eclectic as possible.

Now to get down to actual classroom techniques for teaching this appreciation. I have found that an assignment like: "Elouard, pp. 98-106" is not likely to result in a stimulating discussion. At the beginning of the semester the students receive a schedule showing what poems will be discussed at each class meeting, and in addition they receive some guidance for each preparation. Often this guidance is in the form of detailed questions on the poems to be read. The students tell me that it is much easier to read poems -- especially long poems -- if they are looking for the answers to questions. The question sheets contain plenty of space for the answers. While reading, the student jots down his reaction to the questions. In the next class we discuss the various answers proposed, and the students amplify or alter their responses as appropriate. These pages of notes -- which I do not see -- serve also to focus their review efforts.

As for the types of questions, I think that some should be purely factual, especially at the undergraduate level. Example: "Vers 10, à qui le poète s'adresse-t-il?" (Of course, the questions, answers, and discussion are in French.) "Vers 12, que veut dire le mot 'désaltéré?" Some should be on versification: "Trouvez deux trimètres romantiques." "Vers 9, quel est l'effet produit par la répétition du son 'ou'?" "Dans le poème tout entier quelle métaphore vous paraît la plus frappante?" Some should be questions of interpretation. Example: "Dans le dernier vers du poème 'Le Vase' par Henri de Régnier, 'Je maudissais l'aurore et je pleurais vers l'ombre', que signifient 'l'aurore' et 'l'ombre'?"

I am far from suggesting that this question and answer technique should be used in every class. Variety of approach seems to me immensely helpful in sustaining interest. Instead of the questions, I sometimes offer several English translations with the request to decide which is the best and why. This supposes a previous discussion of the

criteria for judging a poetic translation, and is especially suitable for short poems. In the succeeding class the translations are dissected line by line. "What was lost here?" "The rhyme scheme?" "Was that particularly important to this poem?" "Is line four a truly faithful rendering of the idea?" "Is the archaic word in line seven acceptable?" "Has the translator succeeded in imitating the happy lilt -- or the languorous rhythm -- or the stately dignity of the original?" "What is lost by the translator's inability to include numerous hard c's and g's in line eleven?" And so on. In the end the class votes on the best translation.

Another technique that often produces an impassioned dicussion is a casual remark: "I've never learned to like this poet. It seems to me that his poems are obscure because he has nothing to say." At the next class the students are likely to rival each other in showing me what I should admire.

Somewhat similar to this technique is another that is rather fun to use: you find contradictory statements by two critics about the same poet or poem. (Incidentally, these are not terribly hard to find. Whenever in your reading you come upon a really unusual point of view, you copy and file the quotation. Then you pair it with a statement of the traditional viewpoint.) At the time of the assignment you hand out mimeographed copies of the two conflicting opinions, and ask the students to take sides. Of course, you do not tell them which is the usual view, and during the ensuing discussion you are very very careful to consider all their ideas seriously.

Every now and then one finds a really outrageous remark that can be solemnly handed out to students with: "See if you agree with this critic." Early in the semester there are sure to be some who claim to agree solely because they lack the confidence to disagree. The more sophisticated members will enjoy disabusing them. But let the class set them straight. Don't do it yourself. This, I think, is of capital importance. Never tell a student that he has misunderstood a poem -- even if he obviously has misunderstood. If you do, that is likely to be the end of his participation in discussions. Ask, rather, another student, preferably an extra good one, how he sees the matter, and let him convince the first student of his error. Except when dealing with verifiable facts, the teacher, I believe, should not make any statement stronger than: "I had not thought of it that way. To me this means..." Perhaps working with Oriental students for so many years has made me particularly sensitive to face-saving, but even our Caucasian students will participate more willingly and more creatively if they are sure that their wildest ideas will receive sympathetic consideration.

What else do we do in class besides debate and discuss? In undergraduate classes the students take turns reading poetry aloud AFTER A MODEL. It is possible to buy wonderful recordings of such artists as Pierre Viala and Gérard Philippe reciting poetry. I simply ask one of our laboratory technicians to put the poems I want on a cassette

which I take to class in a small player no heavier than a handbag. Pierre Viala recites one stanza of, say, "Le Lac", then a student imitates him, Viala recites a second stanza, and another student repeats. This is not, as I said, an exercise suitable for a graduate seminar, but it is pleasant and useful if employed sparingly at lower levels.

I occasionally use recordings in the graduate seminar, but for a different purpose: to check on interpretations. For instance, I remember a class having a big argument over a line in La Fontaine's fable, "Les Animaux malades de la peste." The lion says:

"Même il m'est arrivé quelquefois de manger
Le berger"

"Le berger" is a line by itself, the only three syllable line in the poem. Is the lion making light of this crime, or is he giving it added emphasis? In other words, does a very short line following an alexandrine indicate emphasis? To the next class I brought the only recording we have of the poem, Jean Vilar's. We discovered that he throws the line away, and so most of the students opted for the eighteenth century interpretation. Here the important thing was realizing that a poet will vary the length of the line to achieve an effect.

Cassettes are also useful for student recording. At least once a semester each student records on a cassette a poem of his choice with a ten-minute analysis of the poem and a statement of why he chose it. I listen to these recordings one after another, noting any errors of pronunciation, or usage or factual information. This takes less time than grading a set of essays and offers the students an additional experience. Of course, they also write essays.

I like to help my students relate the poetry of a period to its art and its music. For this I am fortunate enough to have the use of the series of slides and lectures called LA CIVILISATION FRANCAISE A TRAVERS LES ARTS prepared by the Services Culturels of the French Embassy in New York. For each showing there are fifty-two color slides of paintings, sculpture, furniture, etc. of the period correlated with a forty minute recorded lecture in elegant French. At intervals the speaker pauses for a short musical selection written in the period being studied. Reproductions of La Mort d'Atala and Le Radeau de la Méduse do more than the legendary ten thousand words to give the flavor of romanticism. A teacher could talk and talk about symbolism, about suggesting rather than stating, about poetry in which the reader must participate, and he would not get his points across as efficiently as if he showed slides of Turner and Monet. Similarly an Yves Tanguy painting reinforces Breton's manifestoes. Incidentally, we use a daylight screen so that the students can see to take notes while viewing the slides and listening to the lecture.

Slides are better than reproductions in a book, of course, but slides use up a whole period while a picture can be shown to a class in a few minutes. It seems worth while to use these few minutes to show portraits of the poets and scenes relevant to the poem being studied. For instance, if the class is reading Péguy's "Présentation de la Beauce à Notre-Dame de Chartres", the students would like to see the cathedral looming up in the distance beyond the fields of wheat. Or if they are reading Samain's "Mon âme est une infante en robe de parade", they should see one of Velasquez' infantas. Watteau's "L'Embarcation pour Cythère" should be introduced along with Baudelaire's "L'Invitation au voyage", and a photo of the cemetery at Scète along with "Le Cimetière marin." These are just a few examples of pictures that seem completely relevant.

The mention of portraits of poets brings up the question of how much time should be spent on biography. I think that depends on the poet: as much time as is needed to understand the poetry. A detailed knowledge of the life of André Breton would not help anyone to understand his poem, "La Pluie", but a little account of the Musset-George Sand affair makes "Les Nuits" vastly more exciting. One does not need to know much about Valéry to appreciate "Le Cimetière marin", but an acquaintance with the facts of Rimbaud's life is essential for a complete appreciation of "Bateau ivre". After all, there is no valid reason why students should be given the same amount of biographical detail for each poet they study.

No matter what efforts a teacher makes to present impartially the work of each poet, his personal preferences will be evident to a class. I scrupulously distinguish between critics' opinion and my own, and I tell the students that they may offer any interpretation they please provided that they can defend it. This attitude has resulted in some highly original interpretations, particularly of contemporary poems. The present generation seems less baffled by symbols and indirection than is my generation. I have learned a lot by listening to students.